

# TOTO'S TRIUMPH

*by Claire Huchet Bishop*

*Illustrated by Claude Ponsot*





# **TOTO'S TRIUMPH**

BY CLAIRE HUCHET BISHOP

*Illustrated by* CLAUDE PONSOT

There were not enough houses for all the people in Paris after the war; and ten-year-old Nicholas and his family had lived for so long in a homeless people's camp outside the city that they had almost given up hope of having a real roof over their heads ever again.

Then one evening Papa came home to the tent and told a wonderful story. He had rescued an escaped parrot from a tree, and the parrot's doting mistress, Madame Champollion, was so grateful that she had said Papa could have the vacant apartment in her house!

It seemed too good to be true. And indeed it was. For there were no babies

*(Continued on back flap)*

*(Continued from front flap)*

allowed, and Nicholas's twin sisters, just one month old, had to be smuggled upstairs in a laundry basket.

Poor Nicholas! How could he save his family from being put out into the cold again once the babies were discovered? If it hadn't been for Madame Champollion's parrot he mightn't have managed it. But Toto's unwitting interventions, which form a delightful chain of comic little episodes throughout the story, culminate in a performance that is as effective as it is funny.

Claude Ponsot's drawings have a truly French flavor, and the same affectionate sympathy as the author's for a gallant and lovable little family.



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Claire Huchet Bishop, a French woman by birth and education, opened the first public library for French children, L'Heure Joyeuse, in Paris. Having inherited the gift of storytelling from her forbears, she told stories to the children who came to the library. Later, after she had married Frank Bishop, a talented American pianist, she came to New York to live, and became an American citizen. Once again she told stories in a library, the New York Public Library, and this time began to write them down.

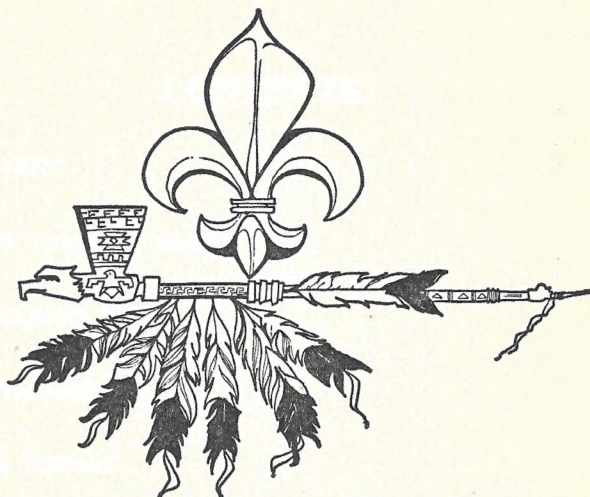
Mrs. Bishop now has a wide following of readers from five years old to eighty. In addition to her two previous books on the lives of the saints, CHRISTOPHER THE GIANT, and BERNARD AND HIS DOGS, she has written an impressive list of best-selling books for children including: AUGUSTUS; THE FERRYMAN; THE FIVE CHINESE BROTHERS; THE MAN WHO LOST HIS HEAD; BLUE SPRING FARM. A prize-winner in the New York Herald Tribune Spring Book Festival of 1947, PANCAKES-PARIS was a runner-up for the John Newbery Medal in 1948. In 1952 TWENTY AND TEN won the annual award of the Child Study Association of America, and in 1953 ALL ALONE was an Honor Book in the New York Herald Tribune Spring Festival.

The author of two adult books, Mrs. Bishop has contributed a number of articles to magazines published here and abroad. She lectures extensively, and has appeared in a weekly television program.



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BY CLAIRE HUCHET BISHOP



ILLUSTRATED BY CLAUDE PONSOT

THE VIKING PRESS · NEW YORK

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# I

## A TENT

The flap of the tent parted and a gust of icy wind rushed in. A man's head appeared. Quickly the man stooped, stepped inside, turned around, and hastened to fasten the flap back. Then he drew himself up and said, "Brrr! It's freezing!"

Maman swiveled around and looked up, and so did Nicolas, a dark-haired, ten-year-old boy with large brown eyes. Maman and Nicolas were huddled together on empty wooden packing boxes, near the small round stove on which a pot of soup simmered slowly. A kerosene lamp flickered in the dark, throwing a faint light on a few pieces of clothing hanging on a rope and on some dishes stacked in boxes. On the ground, in a corner of the tent, blankets were piled on an oilcloth—Papa's and Maman's bed. On the other side was an army cot—Nicolas's bed.



Outside, in the bitter winter evening, shadows moved in and out of other tents, shacks, lean-tos, and improvised cabins, which made of this scrubby lot on the outskirts of Paris, at Ivry's Gate, a temporary camp for homeless people. In the distance, the lights of Paris sparkled, and the rumbling of traffic noises filled the air.

Papa kissed Maman and Nicolas; then he went around the stove, and, squatting on his heels, he looked down, inside a large, deep rectangular wicker laundry basket that rested on four bricks, to keep it off the ground. Papa smiled at two small bundles buried under coverlets and comforters, and said softly, glancing up at Maman, "They are all right."

Maman nodded slowly. "Yes, so far," she said. "I have kept the fire burning high, and Nicolas and I have been sitting between them and the tent opening to protect them from the cold wind. But, oh, Felix, it's getting so frightfully cold!"

She hid her head in her hands. Nicolas tightened his lips. He remembered . . . two years ago, the soft baby sister . . . in the tent . . . the cold . . . the pneumonia . . . and the small coffin no bigger than a doll's.

Papa said quietly, but with a ring in his voice, "This time is different, Marie. The twins are going to grow." He paused, got up, reached for an empty box, sat down again, and announced, "I have found a place!"

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Nicolas's eyes bulged and his mouth fell open. Papa had found a place! Nicolas felt warm all over—even his back, which was exposed to the icy wind. He wanted to hug Maman, next to him. But Maman was looking straight across at Papa without so much as a flicker of an eyelash. There was nothing but weariness in her face.

Nicolas thought, Maman does not believe Papa. He felt resentful. He, Nicolas, could see how tired Papa was. He must have tramped for hours in the cold. He had been home-hunting for days and weeks and months. And now that he was bringing back such good news, Maman seemed hardly to have heard it, let alone notice how exhausted Papa looked.

Presently Papa went on smoothly, "A kitchen and a small room back of it, with a double bed. The kitchen is large enough to hold Nicolas's cot at night. There is a round table to eat on and a couple of chairs. And"—he smiled—"running water in the sink, and a cookstove."

Nicolas put his hand over his mouth. Incredible! Water and a cookstove! And still Maman did not say a word.

Papa went on briskly, "Tomorrow night we will have a real roof over our heads!"

Then all at once Maman came to life and started firing questions at Papa. "Where? . . . How did you find



the place? . . . How is it possible that someone is willing to rent to us?"

Nicolas's heart was in his mouth. Would Papa be able to answer all those questions satisfactorily, or was it going to be like so many other times, when Papa had gradually grown silent and defeated, his warm enthusiasm pricked like a balloon.

"It isn't very far from here. In the thirteenth district of Paris, on the second floor above the ground floor. When we move we—"

"How much?" interrupted Maman.

Now! thought Nicolas. And he held his breath.

"I promised the concierge, the superintendent, five thousand francs when we move in tomorrow."

"Five thousand francs!" Maman gasped.

Nicolas felt the blood rushing to his face. He could not look at Papa. Surely this plan was going to collapse too!

But Papa went on. "Yes, Marie, five thousand francs. I had to. There was no time to consult with you, and it was take it or leave it. I couldn't let this opportunity go by." He threw a glance at the laundry basket.

"But Felix!" cried Maman.

"I know, I know, Marie, I know what you're thinking: next week we shall need those five thousand francs.

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But one step at a time. Today the most important thing is shelter, isn't it?"

Maman bent her head.

"I found the place by a crazy stroke of luck!" Papa chuckled, settling himself more securely on his improvised stool. "I was going down along the Avenue d'Italie, after work, and suddenly a flutter of big wings brushed past my face, and almost at the same moment a fat woman emerged from a house nearby, screaming at the top of her voice, 'Toto! Toto!' Her parrot had got away."

A parrot! Nicolas was all ears. He loved birds. He had never seen live parrots, except in pictures in his schoolbooks, and they looked so beautiful. He wanted to ask, "What color was he? Could you see? Where did he go? Did you see him fly away? Did he come back?" But of course Nicolas knew better than to interrupt Papa, who, anyway, went right on talking.

"I stopped and looked around. The woman was wringing her hands and calling, 'Toto! My precious little heart! Toto! Come back!' Toto was high up in one of the chestnut trees on the avenue. I could just make out his shape on a bare limb. The woman said to me, 'Ah, monsieur, that's what comes from not having his feathers clipped. I have had him only a short time.



And now he will die of the cold, the wretched, adventurous, mischievous bird!"

Now even Maman was interested, and Nicolas began to relax a little. Papa's voice grew buoyant; his face was full of animation; and he made gestures with his hands as he went on explaining what had happened.

"So I said to the woman, 'Bring me a blanket.' She did. And I put it over my shoulders and started to climb the tree."

"To climb the tree!" exclaimed Maman.

Nicolas's heart swelled with a proud feeling of comradeship with Papa: Papa had climbed a tree.

"Yes, I climbed the tree. I had to do it smoothly, so as not to frighten the bird, you understand?"

"Sure!" burst out Nicolas. "Papa, did you go up the other side, away from the bird?"

"I did," said Papa eagerly and knowingly. "I could not go right plump for him. I sort of steered for the branches above and back of him. Anyway, the bird was dazed by the night. The street lamp below gave me just enough light to carry on. Lightly I threw the blanket over him, caught him, and came down with him. Well, you should have seen the woman—Madame Champollion is her name. She was beside herself with joy. She lives on the ground floor—she's the superintendent. She was so thankful; she said I had saved Toto's life and she

kept asking what I said, nothing at all. But as she insisted, imminent, she might I told her about you know? She got. 'Some people are tomorrow. I have to somebody else scrambling for a Here Papa put his Madame Champoll his arms and spread ment is yours if you Just the landlord's five thousand franc

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kept asking what could she do for me. Well, of course, I said, nothing at all; what I had done was just natural. But as she insisted, it occurred to me that, being a superintendent, she might have heard of a place for rent, and I told her about our looking for a room. And what do you know? She grabbed my hand and held it and said, 'Some people are moving from upstairs, two flights up, tomorrow. I have practically promised the apartment to somebody else—you know how it is—everybody scrambling for a place. But you saved Toto's life.' " Here Papa put his two hands on his heart to show what Madame Champollion herself had done. Then he opened his arms and spread them apart and said, " 'The apartment is yours if you wish. And you can skip my fee too. Just the landlord's entrance price when you move in—five thousand francs. Okay?' "

Papa looked at Maman. Maman had begun to smile. She murmured, "Unbelievable! Unbelievable!"

Nicolas beamed. This time the plan had worked. He wanted to say triumphantly, "See, Maman, what we men can do!"

Suddenly Maman's face clouded again and she asked, "And the children—she knows about the children?"

Papa cleared his throat. "She knows about Nicolas."

"What do you mean?" queried Maman anxiously.

"Wait. You see, she asked, 'Any children?' I said,

'Yes, Nicolas, an almost eleven-year-old boy.' And before I could add anything else she broke in, saying, 'That's all right. I was afraid, looking at you, that you might have a younger child, a baby perhaps. Then it would have been out of the question. The landlord is adamant: no babies in the building.' "

"And you did not tell her—"

"No, I did not. I could not."

"You should have," Maman said hotly. "We cannot go there under false pretences. I am not going to move unless—"

"We will move," said Papa tersely. "It's our last chance."

Silence fell in the tent. Nicolas had a lump in his throat. What was going to happen? The landlord did not want babies—not even one baby. And they had two! What would be done, then, with Suzanne and Mandine? As far back as Nicolas could remember, he had wished for a baby sister. After the death of the first one he had wished harder than ever. And lo and behold, a month ago, *two* had come! And ever since, life had been different for Nicolas. Each morning when he woke up there was a song in his heart, and all day long, at school, he kept looking forward to the time when he would go home to this marvel of marvels: his twin sisters. And now—

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"Yes?"

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Chief."



He got up and deliberately walked to the laundry basket, squatted, and spread his arms protectively across it, over the babies, and said fiercely, "I won't let him kill you!"

Papa grabbed Nicolas by the shoulder, jerked him to his feet, shook him, and asked in a stern voice, "Who are you talking about?"

"The landlord!" cried Nicolas.

"Oh!" exclaimed Papa, letting go of him and starting to laugh. Shaking his head and chuckling, he patted Nicolas's shoulder. Maman looked at her son with large eyes full of tenderness. And then, all at once, her expression changed; she tossed back her lock of short hair and announced defiantly, "Don't you worry, Nicolas! We're going to save the twins. And you're going to help!"

Later Nicolas, stretched out on his army cot, listened to the wind howling and shaking the tent. Maman was bundled up under the blankets in one corner. The twins slept in the laundry basket. Papa sat by the fire, watching. Nicolas raised himself on his elbow and whispered, "Papa!"

"Yes?"

"Papa, this is the last night that you are the Big Chief."

"Right you are!" answered Papa.

That was the wonderful thing about Papa—Nicolas never had to go into long explanations. Papa understood. He was in the game at once.

"You are Big Chief," went on Nicolas. "Maman is your squaw. And we live in a tepee the year around."

"We *lived*!" corrected Papa cheerfully.

"We *lived*," emphasized Nicolas. "You know, Papa, when we began to live in this tent I just loved it. It was like in books where they talk about camping in the middle of the great American prairie. Only later, after . . . after . . ." His voice broke.

"Yes, I understand," said Papa gently. "And this is no American prairie. Just a home-hunting people's camp on the outskirts of Paris."

"Papa, why aren't there enough houses for people?"

"Well, there was a war—as a matter of fact, two wars—right on French soil, within only twenty-five years. In the first war, a lot of houses were destroyed. The government had not caught up with reconstruction, when down crashed the second war and more destruction and more displaced persons and four years of occupation."

"But Papa, that was a long time ago. Why don't they build now?"

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housing went for the war in Indochina. War is always bad for poor people, the world over. Can you understand that?"

"Yes. If we were rich we could build our own house, anyhow."

"We could. But as a matter of fact, we would not even have to be rich. We would only have to make a decent living wage. That's all."

"But then, Papa, why can't people—"

"That's enough, Nicolas," said Papa firmly. "It's time to go to sleep. Tomorrow is a big day, you know." His face had darkened.

"You're not angry?" pleaded Nicolas.

"Of course not!" Papa smiled, and he got up and came to sit on the cot. That made it so much easier to talk—very cozy. So Nicolas asked, "Tell me, Papa—the parrot, Toto, does he speak?"

"I guess so. He didn't say anything while I was there. But he probably knows a few words. Some parrots are more talkative than others."

"I can't wait until tomorrow to find out!" said Nicolas. "Tell me, Papa, when we have a real roof, will you come and talk with me at night like this, just the two of us?"

"Of course. Why not?"

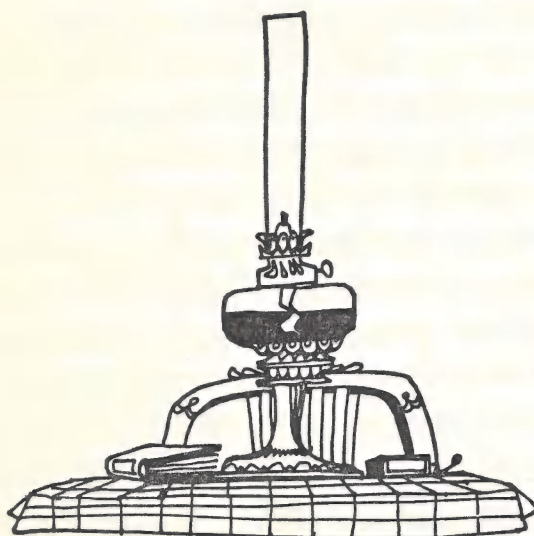
"Well, it won't be quite the same, will it?"

"It will be much better, Nicolas. For one thing, I won't have to watch a fire all night long."

"Yes," agreed Nicolas, sliding further under the covers and closing his eyes. "And we won't be afraid of the wild stampede of the buffaloes either, will we? Do you hear them now, Papa?"

The tent shook under the impact of the wind squalls.

"I hear them," answered Papa quietly. "Go to sleep, Little Chief."



e POW SOT

TH

The next morning was his last day. He would have to leave the district of Paris. He found it very difficult, or he might be. That would be a problem for him. He and his apartment at the time of going to work. He was going to push the harness over to his apartment. Even and, of course. At last school.



## II

### THE LAUNDRY BASKET

The next morning Nicolas went to school as usual. It was his last day in that school. The following week he would have to go to another school, in the thirteenth district of Paris, where they were going to live. He found it very difficult to concentrate, and yet he had to, or he might be punished and have to stay after school. That would be terrible, since Maman was waiting for him. He and the twins and Maman were to go to the apartment at twilight. Early that same morning, before going to work, Papa had packed all the family's belongings on a pushcart, lent by a neighbor. He had slipped the harness over his shoulders and drawn the cart to the apartment. Everything was gone except the baby bottles and, of course, the laundry basket.

At last school was over. Nicolas raced back to the lot.

Maman and the twins were spending the day in a friend's shack. When Nicolas got there, all was ready. The bottles were hidden under the coverlets. As usual, the twins were sleeping peacefully. There were many handshakes and many good wishes from the neighbors in other tents and shacks, but nobody inquired where the family was going—the poor know that it is best not to ask any questions, so that one can make an entirely fresh start somewhere else.

Then Maman picked up the basket, saying, "Let's be on our way, Nicolas." They were off.

For an hour they trudged along. They entered Paris through Ivry's Gate, and soon they reached the Avenue d'Italie. The first number they came to was 192.

"What number is our house, Maman?" inquired Nicolas.

"Number Six *bis*."

"Why *bis*?"

"Because when two houses have the same number, that is the only way to tell which is which. *Bis* means 'repeated.' 'Six *bis*' is another way of saying 'Six again.' "

Nicolas nodded; then he said, "It's a long, long avenue!"

"Yes. One house to every number. Tired?"

He shook his head vehemently. He was not tired; he was afraid. It was almost dark by now. The avenue was





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unfamiliar. He did not know anyone; he did not recognize any store. Far down, at the end of the avenue, toward the center of Paris, stood "*Six bis*"— "*Six bis*," where babies were not allowed; "*Six bis*," like a monster, ready, waiting to swallow up the twins.

And here they were, Maman and he, Nicolas, hurrying toward that dreadful spot! Now he wanted the avenue never to end. He glanced sideways at the building they were passing—Number 70. Already! And Maman carrying the laundry basket with the twins in it, in full view of everybody. Had she forgotten? Should not he, Nicolas, remind her? Papa was not here, so it was up to Little Chief to speak up. But he could not. He was afraid of hearing what was to be done with Suzanne and Mandine. They came to Number 64, and Maman was still dashing ahead. Nicolas made a tremendous effort and cleared his throat.

Just then Maman stopped. "Number Sixty-two, Nicolas," she said. "Now we have to get ready."

Ready? He had a moment of panic. What was going to happen? One never knew, with grown-up people.

Maman put the basket down on the sidewalk. He watched intently as she pulled out from under the little mattress a heap of rough-dried shirts, towels, and underwear. Then she let them fall lightly on the top of the basket until the twins were completely hidden. In the

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twinkling of an eye you could not tell that the twins were in the basket, which now looked just like any ordinary laundry basket full of rough-dried wash. Nicolas smiled happily.

Maman turned toward him and said, "Nicolas, when we get to the house, you go in first. Now, listen carefully. On the ground floor we have to go past the glass door of the superintendent, Madame Champollion. Maybe she won't come out. But if she does, greet her nicely, and then I'll give you the basket and you go right up with it by yourself and get into the apartment, while I stop and talk a bit to Madame Champollion, so that she won't feel slighted. Is that clear?"

"How do I get into the apartment?" inquired Nicolas.

"I'll give you the key. Papa left it with me when he brought back the pushcart. It's two flights up—the first door to the right. You can't go wrong. Now try to lift the basket."

Nicolas took hold of the basket, but he could not rest it on his hip as Maman did. Maman took it back and suggested, "Try holding it in front of you, with both hands at the bottom of the handle—like this." And she showed him.

Manfully he heaved the basket. It worked. Maman said in a businesslike tone, "Yes, it is heavy and bulky

for you. But it won't be long. Only two flights. And you can help yourself by bracing the basket against your knees and pushing gently as you go up. Remember, don't jerk it. Our only hope is that the twins go right on sleeping."

Nicolas didn't say anything. Peering at him closely, Maman saw that his face was white. She squatted in front of him and said, "Cheer up! Probably Madame Champollion won't come out, and I can carry the basket all the way up." Smiling, she gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder, got up, picked up the basket, and called, "Quickly! We still have quite a way to go, and the twins may not like being 'snowed under' too long."

Number 58 . . . 50 . . . 48 . . . 36. One even number to each house. 28 . . . 18. . . . And from then on it seemed that every number came faster. Here was 16 already. Nicolas's heart thumped so hard that he felt as if he could not go one step farther. He wanted to cry, "Stop! Stop!" He wanted to turn around and run away. He tried a game. If the tail of the next dog we see droops, it means we will make it. If the tail of the next dog is bushy, I won't have to take the basket up. If the next dog's tail is like a corkscrew, it— Maman seemed to be flying along, and he had to start running. Then abruptly Maman took his hand and pushed him in front of her through a narrow doorway. "Go ahead," she said.

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He was in a long hall. Light was coming from behind the closed glass door of the superintendent's apartment. At once, instinctively, he proceeded on tiptoes to avoid the clattering noise of his wooden soles. He passed the glass door. He was on the first step of the stairs. . . . He was on the second step, and Maman was close after him, carrying the basket. Suddenly, there was a flood of light from behind them; a door opened; and a big cheery voice said, "Well, well, well, I'll bet you're my new tenants! You're not going up without shaking hands, are you?"

Nicolas and Maman came to a standstill. Then Maman called back in a friendly voice, "Good evening, Madame Champollion. I didn't want to disturb you. But it's a pleasure for me to tell you how happy we are about this place. Nicolas, say 'Good evening' to Madame Champollion."

Maman moved back to let him go by and greet the superintendent. He wanted to grab the basket and make a dash upstairs without further ado. But if there ever was a time not to forget manners, it was now. He took off his beret, went down the two steps, shook hands, said, "Bonsoir, madame," waited half a second, put his beret back on, sauntered past Maman again, and heard her say, "You can go right up, Nicolas. Take this basket, will you? Here is the key."

He grabbed the basket firmly and with relief started up the steps.

"Not so fast, not so fast, young man!" called Madame Champollion good-humoredly. "My, young ones are all the same nowadays—always in a hurry. Turn around and let me have a good look at you."

Nicolas's heart sank, but he braced the precious basket against the next step and turned around again.

"So you're Nicolas!" said Madame Champollion, eyeing him critically. "A fine boy, I'm sure—kind, considerate, polite, clean, careful, and, above all, not noisy. That's the main point. No noise in this house—no crying, no shrieking. Except Toto's, of course. You've heard of Toto, haven't you?"

Dutifully he said, "*Oui, madame.*" Now Madame Champollion had stopped talking and was just looking at him. Would it ever end? Could he go now without offending her? What should he do?

He heard Maman's quiet voice. "You must forgive my Nicolas, Madame Champollion. He is not talkative tonight. A bit tired, I guess. But I daresay you will find him quite well behaved, and I am sure he will love Toto. He is very fond of animals. Now, Nicolas, you can go up. I'll join you presently."

At last! One flight. Around, around. The basket was heavy, though he did help himself by bracing it against

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twins! They w



his knees and pushing gently. Two flights. There was the landing. He remembered: the first door to the right. Suppose he had the wrong door? . . . Suppose he couldn't open it? . . . Suppose . . .

From below rose the voice of Madame Champollion, majestic, like a speaker's voice from a platform. "That's what I say, madame; that's the way with us poor people—all our treasures fit into a pushcart and a laundry basket." And how! Nicolas thought as he worked the key in the hole. The key turned; he seized the handle, opened the door, lifted the basket, carried it inside, and closed the door. He had made it!

He found himself in complete darkness. He didn't know where the light switch was, but even if he had known, he wouldn't have turned it on, for fear of waking up the twins. He didn't have any idea where the few pieces of furniture stood, so he groped for the wall and sat down on the floor. If only Maman would come up soon! But he knew that Maman had to make conversation or else Madame Champollion might feel slighted. That was always bad with a superintendent, but under the present circumstances it could spell disaster.

So he sat there in the dark, his back against the wall, his arms encircling his propped-up knees. Suddenly there was a small whimper from the laundry basket. The twins! They were waking up. Oh, what, what, should

he do? He crept on his knees to the basket, and all at once he knew what to do: he fumbled for the covering clothes and threw them on the floor. The whimper stopped. That was it! Suzanne and Mandine needed some air. It was lucky that they were such small babies, content to sleep twenty hours out of twenty-four!

Would Maman never come? Suddenly a raucous voice shrieked, "*A la soupe, Eugénie, à la soupe!*" Toto! Nicolas could not help giggling. It was Toto! He had forgotten all about the parrot. Toto *did* speak. Nicolas had just heard him plainly. Maybe tomorrow he could see the bird and talk with him. That would be lots of fun.

The door opened and Maman came in swiftly, switching the light on as she closed the door. She threw a glance at the basket, and a look of surprise spread over her face. Then she turned to Nicolas. He nodded. Yes, he had uncovered the twins. All at once Maman was on her knees next to him, pressing him in her arms. He could feel that she was trembling all over.

After some time Maman whispered in his ear, "Did you hear Toto? It was lucky that he called her, or else I would still be down there talking." Softly Maman began to imitate the parrot's nasal voice, "*A la soupe Eugénie, à la soupe!*"

Nicolas chuckled. He looked at Maman. She was

laughing too, but I  
wet, as if she had j

She got up brisk  
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Nicolas smacked  
potato-and-leek so

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laughing too, but he could see that her cheeks were all wet, as if she had just been weeping.

She got up briskly and said, "Let's straighten up a bit here—make a fire, start the soup. There are potatoes and leeks somewhere in a bag."

Nicolas smacked his lips. "Are we going to have potato-and-leek soup?" he inquired.

"Indeed we are! A treat, eh? Because of the weather, leeks have gone up in a week from a hundred and twelve francs to four hundred and fifty francs. But we have to celebrate our having a roof above our heads, don't we? So here we go—potato-and-leek soup—and believe me, with such soup, as the old saying goes, 'I wouldn't call the king my own cousin!'"

"I'd like to peel the potatoes," Nicolas offered eagerly. "You know, the way I do it—one single ribbon from beginning to end, without breaking it. May I?"

"But it has to be a very thin ribbon, Nicolas, remember, so that we don't waste any."

He nodded emphatically.

"All right," said Maman gaily. "You do the potatoes and I'll do the leeks. We want everything ready by the time Papa comes home from work."



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### III

#### A CLEVER BIRD

The next morning when Nicolas woke up he wondered: Where am I? Everything was so quiet and cozy. He opened his eyes and saw the ceiling. A roof—a real roof, an honest-to-goodness roof! He turned around. A wall! All at once he stretched out his arm and pushed the wall as hard as he could. It did not budge. Nicolas laughed softly. It was true—all true. He got up, and his bare feet felt the smooth hardness of the brick floor of the kitchen. He wanted to stamp it and try to dig his heel in it as he used to do on the tent floor. But he remembered just in time: no noise. So instead he crept very quietly toward Maman, who, her back turned, was facing the stove. He encircled her waist with his arms and cried, “Boo!” Maman wheeled around, a surprised look on her face, just as if she had no idea whatever who was

there. Then she said softly, "Papa is still asleep. Today he is on the afternoon shift at the factory."

"And Suzanne and Mandine?" inquired Nicolas, bending over the basket.

"Just as good as gold. Not a sound from them. I fed them early this morning. Now, put on your slippers, wash, and get dressed. After you have folded your cot you can have breakfast, while I give the twins their second meal."

As soon as Nicolas was ready he came back toward the stove. The big, high washtub was set on it. Quickly he drew over an empty wooden box, climbed on it, and watched with delight the boiling water falling over the clothes like rain from the spout of a giant percolator. Then he noticed, next to the washtub, a pot of simmering onion soup. He said, "Maman, why are you making onion soup so early today?"

"Because the smell of onion soup is stronger than the smell of the wash. That way, Madame Champollion will not guess that we are laundering diapers."

Nicolas smiled knowingly. Maman *was* clever. Sometimes he thought she was almost as clever as Papa. Almost.

He carried the empty box back near the table, sat down, broke a piece from the long bread loaf—yesterday's bread; it was more economical—and dipped it into

the bowl of hot water. Safe, the comfort of Papa asleep in the water over the wash—everything was

Maman, who said, "Nicolas, you've

He licked his lips. Contented he felt. He tried again. I was expecting to see Maman did not stare at it. And still Maman went Nicolas.

"Stop it, Nicolas, utter amazement in her eyes as she got up the basket next to the stove, her hands and

"Maman!" Nicolas jumped from his stool. I saw She shook her head in the room, looked at her purse, and turned

"Nicolas, run away, please. I



the bowl of hot milk. A roof over their heads, the twins safe, the comforting warmth from the kitchen stove, Papa asleep in the other room, the soft gurgle of the water over the wash, the pungent smell of onion soup—everything was snug and peaceful.

Maman, who was nursing Mandine, said playfully, "Nicolas, you've got a white mustache!"

He licked his lips. Then he tried to purr. That's how contented he felt. He wanted to purr. Rrr. Like a cat. He tried again. Rrrr, Rrrrr. He watched Maman's face, expecting to see it break into a smile. Rrr, Rrrr, Rrrrr. Maman did not smile. Rrrrrr. He was getting quite good at it. And still Maman paid no attention. RrrrrrRRRR! went Nicolas.

"Stop it, Nicolas!" said Maman sharply, and, to his utter amazement, Nicolas saw that she had tears in her eyes as she got up and carefully put Mandine back in the basket next to Suzanne. Then she covered her face with her hands and remained there standing, motionless.

"Maman!" Nicolas whispered anxiously, and he slid from his stool. But already Maman had wiped her face. She shook her lock of short hair back, went to the bedroom, looked at her sleeping husband, reached for her purse, and turned toward Nicolas.

"Nicolas, run to the store and get some milk right away, please. I don't have enough for even one good

feeding this morning. Hurry, before they get hungry again and start to cry."

Nicolas did not have to be told twice. In a jiffy he put on his shoes, asking at the same time, "Where is the dairy, Maman?"

"I don't know. You'll have to find out. Only you'd better not ask Madame Champollion. She might detain you, talking. Try to get past her door quickly."

He nodded, grabbed his cape and beret, took the aluminum milk container and the change, and was gone. How difficult it was not to make a lot of noise with his wooden soles! But he was nimble. He was down and out of the house before Madame Champollion could so much as manage to turn around and open the door.

He scanned the avenue, right and left. Where was the nearest dairy? As luck would have it, a little girl came along carrying a milk pitcher with great care. "Please," said Nicolas, "where is the dairy?" The little girl stopped and slowly made a motion with her head. "Over there, at the corner," she said. Then she resumed her careful walking.

He ran in the direction she had pointed, a whole long block. He was just beginning to fear that he had missed the dairy, when suddenly he spied it on the corner of the next block.

On his way back, he too walked slowly, because the

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lid of the milk container did not fit very tightly. He kept watching the sidewalk, not only for dogs and cats who might jump across suddenly and trip him, but also for the brooms with long handles that people used to clean the streets with at this time of the day. In the gutter fresh water gushed gaily, and some children squatting on the curb were sailing paper boats. Nicolas longed to set his milk pail down and join them for a while. But of course he knew he could not. Maybe he could come back later. No, later it would be past cleaning time and there would be no running water. Tomorrow, perhaps? No, tomorrow was Sunday and the water would not be running. And Monday he would have to start going to school—for the whole week, except Thursday, the free day. I will have to wait for Thursday to sail a paper boat down the gutter, he thought as he walked on.

He was nearly home when he began to wonder which tree Toto had alighted on. Was it this one, or that one? How far up had the parrot been? Nicolas would have to ask Papa. Bang! All of a sudden he collided with something round and bouncy, like a ball, and an angry voice shouted, "Can't you look where you're going? Walking with your nose up in the air! Children today—no head, no manners, no nothing!"

"Excuse me, sir," said Nicolas hurriedly as he got out

of the way of a fat old gentleman brandishing a cane. Anxiously he looked at the container, to which he had held fast. There were drops of spilled milk all around. Carefully Nicolas wiped them off with his handkerchief. My, that was a close call! Such precious stuff! If Maman could no longer nurse the twins, it meant that more money had to be spent for milk.

At last, here was Number 6 bis. If he was not detained by Madame Champollion all would be well: Maman would have the milk in time; the twins would not cry and, once more, they would be saved. He went in, and his heart sank. The hall was filled with the capacious figure of Madame Champollion holding a broom. She hailed him genially.

"Well, look at our nice young man running errands for Maman! That's a boy! Did you sleep all right? . . . And Maman and Papa? Such a nice man, your pa! Just grand!"

He stood there, beret in hand. "Good morning, madame. . . . Yes, thank you, madame." And, finally: "Excuse me, madame, but Maman is waiting and I—"

"Sure, sure! And Maman is making onion soup too! I can smell it. Good, good! Go right up. Wouldn't you like to say hello to Toto?"

"Well, I—no. That is—Maman—"

"That's all right. Just say hello. It

He stood, not might offend her

"Probably yes, Champollion, from

"Oh yes, madame Maman—"

"Don't be silly here, you could Come on!"

He followed. It was dark—on the courtyard.

"Here he is!"

But Nicolas could

"Wait!" cried on the electric light

"Oh!" exclaimed Such a beauty!

Toto was a fine back was emerald chrome-yellow, breast was of leather which was crowded



"That's all right. I wouldn't keep you for the world. Just say hello. It won't take any time."

He stood, not knowing what to do. If he didn't go, he might offend her. If he did go, it *would* take time and—

"Probably you don't like parrots," said Madame Champollion, frowning.

"Oh yes, madame, I do, very much. It's only that Maman—"

"Don't be silly. In the time that we've been talking here, you could already have said hello and been gone. Come on!"

He followed her into the superintendent's quarters. It was dark—only one small window opening onto the courtyard.

"Here he is!" chimed Madame Champollion.

But Nicolas could not see a thing.

"Wait!" cried Madame Champollion, and she turned on the electric lights. "Look!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Nicolas, and then he was speechless. Such a beauty!

Toto was a foot long, and sumptuously dressed. His back was emerald-green, his wings emerald too, with chrome-yellow, ultramarine, and scarlet streaks. His breast was of lemon-yellow hue, and so was his head, which was crowned with a tuft of bright blue feathers

above his horny, hooked gray beak. His golden eyes were encircled with a black band.

Nicolas noticed that Toto could make the centers of his eyes, the pupils, very small or very large. He saw also that the parrot had four claws on each leg: two long ones in front, one long one and one short one in back. That way he could not only hold onto a bar or a branch, and climb, but he could also hang head down.

After a while Nicolas whispered, "How old is he, madame?"

"About six years old. I'm not quite sure, because I don't know where he came from originally."

"Maybe Mexico or Central America," suggested Nicolas. "That's where many parrots come from. I read it in a book. They say also that parrots live an awfully long time."

"Indeed," said Madame Champollion approvingly, "much longer than we do. About one hundred years."

"One hundred years!" repeated Nicolas, who had forgotten all about his being in a hurry. "What does Toto eat?"

"Mostly sunflower seeds. But he likes practically anything. Sunflower seeds are his staple food, though."

"Ah, that's why he has such beautiful colors. He eats 'suns'!" joked Nicolas, making a pun on the French word for sunflowers, *soleils*.

Madame (vicious delight encouraged,

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Madame Champollion shook with laughter and obvious delight at seeing her pet so well appreciated. She encouraged, "Say something to him!"

"Bonjour, Toto," said Nicolas in a small voice. He felt shy—the parrot looked so grand and mysterious.

"Don't be bashful!" urged Madame Champollion. "Speak up! He doesn't know you yet. Try again."

"Bonjour, Toto."

"Bonjour," muttered Toto, shaking himself.

"He answered me! He answered me!" cried Nicolas happily.

"That shows he likes you," said Madame Champollion, beaming. "He doesn't like everybody. And when he doesn't, oh my, oh my, he can insult people!"

"Insult people!" Nicolas exclaimed.

"Indeed! Real insults too. He learned them from his previous master. I can't do anything about it." And she added, speaking to the parrot in a sweet voice, "I never know who you, my precious little heart, are going to dislike, do I?"

"Kooroo," cooed Toto.

Nicolas laughed. "Maybe I should tell him my name."

"Of course, my boy. Go ahead. Toto is a clever bird. Try, very slowly."

Nicolas moved nearer the cage. "Ni-co-las. Ni-co-las."

Some indistinct sounds came from the bird's throat. Then he cocked his head, raised himself, and seemed to come fully to life.

"Ni-co-las," repeated the boy eagerly.

"La, la, la!" shouted the parrot.

"Nicolas! Nicolas, Nicolas!" the boy kept saying, all excited by now.

"He will learn," put in Madame Champollion soothingly. "You must give him time. Every day you should—"

Suddenly from upstairs there was a faint sound of crying. White in the face, Nicolas shouted, "Nicolas! Nicolas! Nicolas!" waving at Toto and hurriedly retreating at the same time toward the steps. "Nicolas! Nicolas!" He would not stop shouting. Astonished, Madame Champollion came toward him in the hall, her hand directed toward his mouth.

She had almost reached him as he stepped on the first step, still shouting, when suddenly another shrill voice made her turn around. "'Colas! 'Colas! 'Colas!"

It was Toto! Madame Champollion put her two hands over her ears and started roaring with laughter. Nicolas dashed upstairs, followed by Toto's deafening voice. Maman opened the door, shut it quickly behind him, and grabbed the milk can, saying sharply, "What took you so long?"

Papa was pac  
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"You?" cried

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Papa was pacing the floor with the crying Mandine in his arms. And still the house resounded with Toto's shrieks. As Maman busied herself with the milk she kept saying, "If only that bird would keep up that racket! If only he—"

"I can go back and make him talk some more," volunteered Nicolas sheepishly.

"You?" cried Maman. "So that's where you were!"

He turned his face away. He didn't want to cry. He had tried so hard. Then, in the superintendent's quarters, he had forgotten, and he had stayed too long with Toto. And now the twins and the whole family were in mortal danger. It was not fair! It was not fair! Within himself he began begging the parrot, Go on, Toto! Please, please, go on! Don't stop! Toto, go—

Abruptly the parrot's voice died out. Terror gripped wide-eyed Nicolas, and he opened his mouth to shout again. But Papa's hand was on his shoulder, and suddenly Nicolas didn't hear a thing. Everything was quiet. He looked up at Papa. In Papa's left arm, Mandine had stopped crying. Maman came and took charge of her.

Then Papa said, "So, I gather you were making friends with Toto, is that it?"

Nicolas nodded darkly.

"It's not such a bad idea," Papa went on. "Not a bad

idea at all. Only maybe it's not so good when you're running errands for the twins, eh?"

Nicolas nodded again, this time a little more hopefully. Papa didn't seem very cross. All at once he burst out chuckling. "That's the second time that bird has saved our lives!"

Nicolas gulped and said, "He's smart."

"He is, the rascal!" approved Papa. "By the way, what were you trying to teach him that took you so long?"

Nicolas lowered his head. He was embarrassed and pleased at the same time. "I was trying to teach him my name."

"And he got it?" asked Papa gaily.

"Almost," Nicolas answered eagerly. "'Colas, he called me. 'Colas."

"'Colas!" chanted Papa, slapping Nicolas on the back. "That's pretty good. So that's what he was shouting. 'Colas! And he certainly liked the sound of it. He was ready to keep it up forever."

"Papa, what do you think made him stop?"

"Probably Madame Champollion got tired of the noise and she threw a blanket over his cage. Look, Nicolas, since you've still got your coat on, how would you like to come out with me and see the tree I climbed to get Toto?"

Nicolas clapped his hands.  
then he threw a blanket over  
him too?

Maman smiled.  
noon Papa went to  
the hospital. The  
good time now.



Nicolas clapped his hands for joy. "Oh boy!" But then he threw a glance at his mother. Had she forgiven him too?

Maman smiled. "Run along," she said. "This afternoon Papa won't be home and I have an appointment at the hospital. Then you'll have to stay here. So have a good time now."



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## IV

### CATASTROPHE

"Why do you have to go out, Maman?" asked Nicolas in a worried voice.

"I have to, I have to, Nicolas. I was given a number last week at the X-ray clinic, but I didn't know then that we would be here today, and under such circumstances. And, by the way, don't get it into your head that I'm sick; it's just a necessary precaution."

"Maybe you could go next week, Maman."

"No. If I don't go this afternoon, I miss my turn and it may be months before I can get another appointment. Do you understand?"

Nicolas did not answer.

"Listen, Nicolas, I wish I didn't have to leave you alone here with the twins. I know how you feel. But, *mon petit*, it's going to be all right. Suzanne and Maudine have just been fed. They are bound to sleep for

four hours at a stretch anyhow, and I'll be back long before that. I have the number that's to be called first."

"And if they wake up and start to cry?" asked Nicolas anxiously.

"They won't, but keep watching. If you see they are going to cry just give them some milk. See the bottles, right in the pan of lukewarm water on the stove? It won't hurt them to be fed off schedule once. After you feed them they'll go right back to sleep. Don't worry."

"And if somebody comes?" cried Nicolas.

"If somebody comes? Nobody will come. We don't know anyone around here."

"There is Madame Champollion," put in Nicolas.

Maman tucked her shawl around her shoulders impatiently. "You *would* think of the most far-fetched possibility, wouldn't you! You just have too much imagination, Nicolas. Why on earth would huge Madame Champollion take into her head to climb two flights of stairs to call on us? Why? You tell me."

"Maybe—"

"Maybe, maybe! If all the 'maybes' were at the end of your nose the line would reach from here to New York!" snapped Maman. "How aggravating you can be sometimes, Nicolas, especially when I'm in a hurry. All right, suppose Madame Champollion comes up! You know very well that you can always speak through the

closed door and say  
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Champollion will re  
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"'Madame, Maman  
chanted Nicolas, lo

"There you are!"  
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closed door and say politely to her, 'Madame, Maman told me not to open the door.' That's a perfectly good answer for any child to make, and the kind Madame Champollion will respect, surely, because she would not want you to be disobedient. Is that clear? Repeat, 'Madame, Maman told me not to open the door.'"

"'Madame, Maman told me not to open the door,'" chanted Nicolas, looking very much relieved.

"There you are!" cried Maman triumphantly. "It's as simple as that. And don't you open it, either!" she added playfully, raising a finger at him.

He shook his head vehemently. Maman smiled, threw him a kiss, opened the door and then shut it. He heard her footsteps going down the stairway.

Then all was quiet around him. Silence filled the room like water in a well, and Nicolas was at the bottom of it, alone. Right away—and softly, since he was wearing his felt slippers—he moved toward the window. He would look at the people and the traffic. It would be fun, and he would not feel so lonely. But no, that was not such a good idea. He'd better not show himself. He had rather no one knew he was in the apartment.

What could he do? He drew out of his pocket two brilliant marbles and looked at them longingly. No. He could not play marbles. That would make noise and betray his presence. He stood listening to the ticktock

of the alarm clock. It fell in the silence so slowly and evenly that it seemed to Nicolas that the ticking had already gone on for hours since Maman had left. Had Maman reached the clinic by now? Was she on her way back? Oh, he couldn't bear the waiting! If only he could think of something to do.

And all at once he did know. Why, he would read his book! He had one book, one only, which had been given to him when he was six years old. It was a story for younger boys, but what did that matter? He still loved it dearly. It was his own book, and he knew the story by heart, which only made it all the more thrilling to read over again. Now, where was his book? He looked in the small "bookcase" that Papa had made the night before out of two empty wooden boxes. Sure enough, there it was. Nicolas recognized it immediately, in its brown wrapping, which he himself had put on a long time ago. He took it to the table, sat down on a chair—for a change—carefully opened the wrapping, and there it was: the gay blue and yellow cover of *The Five Chinese Brothers*, only the title was in French—*Les Cinq Frères Chinois*. Soon he had forgotten all about being alone with the twins and waiting for Maman. He read slowly and looked at each picture for a long, long time. He was completely absorbed.

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Rap, tap, tap  
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Rap, tap, tap  
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He jumped. Had he heard right? He remained motionless, listening and tense.

Rap, tap, tap!

Holding his breath, he turned his eyes toward the door.

Rap, tap, tap! "Nicolas, it's I, the superintendent, Madame Champollion!"

He didn't move. Maybe she would go away, thinking he wasn't there. Then he wouldn't have to speak at all. He waited.

"Nicolas, I know you're there! I saw your mother go out alone."

He hesitated, and then he decided to try not answering once more. He continued to sit perfectly still. She might think he was asleep. Then he heard Madame Champollion say just that: "Maybe he's asleep." And he smiled! Now, surely, she would go away.

Bang! Bang! The door shook under the impact of a strong fist. Nicolas couldn't pretend any more. Now was the time. He braced himself and called out dutifully, "Madame, Maman told me not to open the door."

"But Nicolas, it's I, the superintendent, Madame Champollion."

Stubbornly he recited again, "Madame, Maman told me not to open the door."

"Nicolas, it's very nice to be so obedient, but there's

somebody with me—Mr. Monfort, the landlord. Surely your maman would not approve of your not opening to the landlord!”

*The landlord!* Perspiration ran down Nicolas's neck. The landlord! Oh, if only Maman would come home!

Like a drowning man holding to a buoy for dear life, he clung to the sentence and chanted again, “Madame, Maman told me not to open the door.”

“Look here, boy,” boomed a brisk masculine voice, “stop that nonsense and open the door. I am the landlord, do you understand? The landlord. This place belongs to me. I have a right to get into it—a right!”

“But, monsieur,” said Madame Champollion gently, “the boy is alone, and he is doing what his mother told him to do. What about your coming back when she is home? Maybe she won't be long. I'll ask the boy where she went. Nicolas!”

“Who do you think I am?” shouted the man angrily. “Do I have to put you out of your job, madame, in order to teach you who is the boss here? I'll handle this matter. Listen to me, boy: if you don't open that door right away I am going to get the police. Do you hear me—the police! I am going to count up to twenty, and meanwhile you can make up your mind.”

The police! the police! Oh, if only Maman would come home! What, what should he do?

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"Do you hear me, boy? I am starting to count. One . . ."

Wildly Nicolas looked around. Then he grabbed a towel here, a shirt there, a piece of underwear, and delicately, as he had seen his mother do the day before, he covered the twins. Thank goodness they could sleep through anything. And wasn't it lucky that the diapers washed that morning had dried so fast that Maman had been able to put them away!

"Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen . . ." Through the door the numbers hit him like hard balls. His head swirled.

"Twenty!" Bang! Bang! Bang!

Nicolas opened the door.

"What do you mean, keeping me waiting like this?" bellowed Mr. Monfort, a big, blond, burly, tough-looking man, rudely pushing Nicolas to one side and striding into the room.

"He is a very good boy, Nicolas is," said Madame Champollion soothingly.

"That's what *you* say. As a matter of fact, there is nothing but trouble with children in a house—always. I thought I had made it clear to you that you were not to rent to people with—"

"*Infants*," put in Madame Champollion with offended dignity. "Infants, monsieur. You would hardly call this lad an infant, could you, sir?"

Behind Mr. Monfort's back she winked at Nicolas, who was standing with his back against the wall. He did not wink back. His heart was in his mouth. Mr. Monfort was in front of the laundry basket. Then the man moved on. He was looking all around. He went into the bedroom. He came back.

"Satisfied, monsieur?" inquired Madame Champollion grandly.

Mr. Monfort snorted.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Madame Champollion triumphantly. "Lovely people!"

Mr. Monfort shrugged his shoulders and went to the door. Madame Champollion followed him, patting Nicolas's head affectionately as she went by. Nicolas did not say anything. Within himself he kept urging them: Go, go, go away. They were at the door. He moved to close it.

Mr. Monfort turned around and said in a somewhat softened voice, "Well, thanks, boy. Only, next time, you— What's that?" he cried suddenly, looking over Nicolas's head. In two strides he had reached the stove, and, pointing an accusing finger at the baby bottles, he yelled, "Madame Champollion! Come here! . . . Yes, you! Look at that! Look at that!"

The next thing Nicolas knew he was being shaken

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roughly and Madame Champollion was shouting in his ears, "Where is the baby? Where is the baby?"

Wildly Nicolas fought to free himself and to avoid the blows. He dodged, he kicked, he slid on the floor. But he would not talk.

Mr. Monfort eyed him contemptuously. "We don't need him anyhow. We can find the baby." And, scowling at Madame Champollion: "*You* can! It's no news to you. You knew all the time that there was one!"

"Sir, I did not! I never did! Cross my heart, I did not. To think that they would play such a trick on me! Heaven is my witness that I never, never knew!"

"Enough! Get busy!" snarled Mr. Monfort.

Madame Champollion threw a dark glance at Nicolas and went to the bedroom. Defiantly she turned back the bed covers. Nothing. She bent and looked under the bed. Nothing. She peered behind the door. She opened

the closet. Then she marched back into the kitchen, frowning and red in the face. She was at her wits' end. Mr. Monfort stood, his arms crossed, waiting.

Suddenly Madame Champollion uttered a small cry and made a beeline for the laundry basket. Fiercely she began throwing the wash off the top, and all at once she moaned, "Oh!" and had to steady herself against the table in back of her.

Mr. Monfort rushed to her side. His eyes popped out; his face turned purple; his neck seemed to swell. He shook his fist and shouted, "Twins! Twins!"

"Yes, twins," said a quiet voice at the door. And Maman walked in.

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# V

## SAD SUNDAY

As far back as Nicolas could remember there had never been a gloomier Sunday. Papa had gone to look for a new place to move into. Maman was silent most of the day. There was no longer any joy in the warm kitchen. It was of no comfort that the twins could cry any time they felt like it and that they did not have to be hidden any more.

Late in the afternoon forlorn Nicolas sat by the laundry basket, looking at Suzanne and Mandine. All day he had had a question in his mind and had postponed asking it. But it was gnawing at him. He had to ask. He mustered all his courage, swallowed hard, and called, "Maman!"

"Yes," answered Maman in a tired voice.

"Maman," burst out Nicolas very fast, "*he* said he was going to get the police."

"I know," said Maman. "You told us last night, Nicolas."

He steeled himself to go on. "Maman, was it wrong to open the door? If I hadn't opened—" Now he had said it!

Maman came over to him and said gently and firmly, "You mustn't worry, Nicolas. You did the best you could. We didn't scold you, did we?"

He shook his head.

"No, don't worry," repeated Maman. "It wasn't your fault. It is just one of those things."

Nicolas heaved a big sigh. However, he could not let it go at that. He had to be very sure. So he asked again, "Maybe, Maman, I should have let him go to fetch the police. That would have taken time. Meanwhile you would have come home, and then—"

"And then what? You and your 'maybes,' Nicolas! Don't you think the police would have discovered the twins? And even if they hadn't, can't you see that by that time Mr. Monfort would have been so incensed that twins or no twins he would have put us out anyhow?"

Nicolas was obviously relieved.

"No, Nicolas, you mustn't brood. What happened, happened. That's all. Life is like that. Now, listen, why don't you go out for a while? You've been in all day. Go, while the sun is still shining. It's four o'clock, and





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most people are back from their Sunday stroll, so you might find some boy to play with on the sidewalk."

"I don't want to start making friends now that we're moving away."

"And how do you know Papa is not going to find a place near here?"

Nicolas said tersely, "I don't want to go out."

Maman looked at him searchingly and said, "I do wish you would run an errand for me. The bakery down the avenue is open after four o'clock on Sunday. I saw the sign yesterday afternoon. Why don't you go and buy a loaf of bread? It will save having to do it tomorrow morning, when we're in a hurry."

He stood frowning, motionless.

"You might even stop and say hello to Toto and teach him some words," suggested Maman hopefully.

"I don't want to! I don't want to!" Nicolas shouted passionately. "I don't want to! I detest Toto! I detest Madame Champollion! I detest—"

"Everybody," ended Maman. "Now listen carefully, Nicolas. You don't have to feel embarrassed at meeting Madame Champollion. Don't forget: she is in hot water too with the landlord. Your pride may be hurt, but so is hers. So if you see her just say, 'Bonjour, madame.' Now, here is the money for the bread."

Reluctantly he proceeded downstairs. As he reached

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the last flight he saw Madame Champollion framed in her doorway, watching him come down. He wished he could disappear into a mouse's hole.

"I thought it was you!" remarked Madame Champollion dryly.

"Bonjour, madame," he mumbled, taking off his beret and going past her without looking. A hand was placed on his shoulder, and Madame Champollion said, "Come in."

He winced. The hand was commanding, and so was the voice. There was no escape. Maman was all wrong. He should not have come down. Slowly he walked into the superintendent's quarters, and was very surprised to see Toto outside his cage, freely climbing up and down.

"Yes," explained Madame Champollion, "I can let him out now. I had his wings trimmed yesterday. That was just before Mr. Monfort came," she added pointedly.

There was a silence.

Then: "That was an awful, awful trick to play on me!" Madame Champollion declared severely.

Nicolas reddened and made as if to go.

"Stay right here," ordered Madame Champollion. "I want to talk to you. First, get this straight. I didn't ask you in here to talk against your parents, though heaven knows how I am ever going to clear myself of the landlord's accusation. He doesn't believe that I didn't know



about the babies. He said I am too smart for that. Well, as I told him, 'Thanks for the compliment, but that woman, she was smarter.' That's your ma. And that's the truth. She was—for a while, anyway. And you're no dumbbell, either! And your pa—well, your pa, he just won my heart, that's all there is to it."

Nicolas was puzzled. Was Madame Champollion angry or friendly?

"Where is your pa?" she inquired suddenly.

"He went to look for a new place."

"Ah, that's it. He must have left so early that I didn't hear him. Now this is it: I was about to take my two hundred pounds upstairs to talk to him and your ma when I heard you coming down. Now you can give your ma the message: I want to be sure that you clear out of here early tomorrow. After what happened yesterday, I don't want any hitch, see?"

"'Colas! 'Colas!' called Toto, standing outside on the top of his cage and raising a claw.

"Look at him!" exclaimed Madame Champollion. "He remembers! He knows you. And he likes you. He only likes good people, my Toto does. For land's sake, he wants to shake hands with you. Go and give him your hand, quietly. Don't be afraid."

For the first time since the previous night Nicolas's face brightened. He went to the cage and slowly ex-

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tended his hand toward Toto. Toto put his claw on it.  
"Bonjour, 'Colas!"

"Bonjour, Toto!"

Toto lifted himself and landed on Nicolas's arm.

"Well, I declare! I've never seen him so friendly. It's a pity you're going away, a pity. Tell me—before you came here where did you live? Your pa said something about Ivry's Gate, but I was so flustered about Toto at the time that I didn't pay much attention. Where was it exactly?"

"Near Ivry's Gate. On an empty lot."

"On an empty lot? Sounds bad. What did you have there, a shack of some sort?"

"No. We lived in a tent."

"In a tent!" wailed Madame Champollion, throwing up her arms, which caused Toto to fly back on the top of his cage—that was about as high as he could go now. As he did so, a scarlet-and-yellow feather fell off, and Nicolas bent down quickly to pick it up and at the same time hide his embarrassment.

"Keep it," said Madame Champollion, "if you wish. Do you mean to say that you actually lived in a tent? In that weather! It's crazy!"

"Lots of people live in tents," he retorted hotly. "Like us. With children too. They can't find anything else. So there are tents."

Madame Champollion put her two hands on her heart and shook her head. "I had heard about it—yes, I had—but I didn't believe it. And then, I thought people who lived in tents were good-for-nothings—just plain tramps. And mind you, even tramps should have a roof. But just the same, it doesn't worry you so much if you think that only tramps are living in the tents—that is, it doesn't keep you awake at night. You just say to yourself over and over again: They are tramps; they are tramps. As a matter of fact, you want them all to be tramps, so that you can go to sleep peacefully, if you know what I mean."

Nicolas was not sure, but already Madame Champollion was going on.

"But now I have met you, you people—people like me, not tramps. It's dreadful, dreadful! I wish there was a way out and you could stay here, even if it were only during this cold spell. I wish the old galoot would give you a break. But he won't. Not he, the old galoot—not he!" She suddenly looked at Nicolas critically. "Don't you ever tell anyone that I called him an old galoot!"

He shook his head vigorously.

"What a life, what a life!" moaned Madame Champollion. "And you said your pa went to look for a place? Well, he'd better find something. I had a cup of coffee this noon at the café next door, and do you know what

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they were saying over the radio? They said the temperature had dropped twenty degrees since Friday. Big chunks of ice are rolling in the Seine. There is snow on the Riviera. The harbor at Dunkirk is frozen. And wolves—yes, wolves—not seen for fifty years are leaving their hideouts in the Ardennes Forest.”

Snow! Ice! Wolves! Nicolas stood transfixed as Madame Champollion’s voice rose to the pitch of declamation. “No winter like this one in France since eighteenth-century!” She made a sweeping gesture, paused, and added quietly, “That’s what they said over the radio. Now, about you and your family: if I were the Manitou—”

The Manitou! Nicolas’s eyes sparkled. “That’s in *The Last of the Mohicans!*” he rushed to say.

“That’s what in what?” queried Madame Champollion suspiciously.

“The Manitou—what you said. The Indians’ Great Spirit. It’s in a book I read at school. The book is called *The Last of the Mohicans.*”

“My, you’re bright! No doubt about it,” said Madame Champollion. “Come to think of it, I remember a book like that myself. . . . When I was a little girl. A good book, eh?”

“Yes—all about Indians.”

“And the Manitou is in it?”

"Yes. He's the Great Spirit. He can do anything."

"That's just it!" rejoined Madame Champollion. "If I were the Manitou— But I'm not. Mr. Monfort is. So you tell your ma to be sure to move out early tomorrow. Of course the law gives you until sunset. But it's February the first, and there is always a lot to do on the first of the month. And as I said before, I don't want any hitch, or else I too might find myself obliged to pitch my tent somewhere, and I am not young any more. So you tell your ma. Understand?"

"*Oui, madame.*"

"Of course you do! As I said before, you're bright." Then suddenly her whole body started to shake and quiver like Jello, and she chuckled. "My! You did almost put it over the old"—her voice dropped—"Galoot. I have to be careful of Toto! Yes, you almost did—if it hadn't been for those milk bottles. If only you had thought of shoveling them into the oven! Just that. Into the oven. But of course one can't think of everything. Well, I mustn't keep you. Don't forget to tell your ma."

Quickly Nicolas said, "*Au revoir, madame. Au revoir, Toto.*" Then he practically bolted out of the room and into the street. In his ears rang the terrifying word, "wolves," and like a stabbing at his heart was Madame Champollion's last remark: "If only you had thought of shoveling them into the oven."

NICOL

Nicolas woke up down on the table! Vulture!"

Eyes closed, N long before Papa whether Papa had very quiet and new learn a lot.

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"What galls me he won't give us a day. After all, the wave is bound to hours."

## VI

### NICOLAS TO THE RESCUE

Nicolas woke up with a start as Papa brought his fist down on the table and said over and over again, "Vulture! Vulture!"

Eyes closed, Nicolas listened. He had fallen asleep long before Papa had come home, so he did not know whether Papa had found a place or not. Now, if he kept very quiet and never let on that he was awake, he might learn a lot.

He heard Maman's voice. "Don't make so much noise, Felix. You will wake up Nicolas."

"What galls me," went on Papa more quietly, "is that he won't give us a break. Not even a week. Not even a day. After all, this is very unusual weather. This cold wave is bound to end soon—maybe in twenty-four hours."



"Felix, what you found is better than the tent, though, isn't it? It has a roof."

"A roof! Would you say that an old streetcar has a roof? Would you? An old streetcar rotting in the woods in a suburb east of Paris!"

Nicolas was all ears. An old streetcar! They were going to live in an old streetcar! How exciting! Maybe the driving handle was still there, and the bell. Already Nicolas could picture himself standing in front of the car, turning the handle and ringing the bell. What fun! And, in case of wolves— No, wolves would not come as far south as the suburbs. And yet, who knows, in this weather? In case of wolves an old streetcar would mean protection. It would be much, much better than a tent.

Papa's voice rose again, indignant. "An old streetcar! How do you think we are going to heat the darn thing? That's all hard-working people like us can find to house themselves in this world of ours—an old streetcar!" Maman sighed. Papa declared, "That's what comes from wars—housing shortages. I couldn't even find room in a municipal shelter. I visited them all. Other people don't like this murderous cold any better than we do. The shelters are all filled beyond capacity. There are ten thousand people in Paris alone, roaming around every night, trying to find a roof."

"Ten thousand!" Maman gasped.



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"Yes, don't think we're the only ones up against it. If we could just gain a little time—even as little as twenty-four hours—"

There was a silence. Nicolas did not move. Eyes closed, he waited for the conversation to resume. Maybe Papa would have an idea. Papa always had ideas.

Maman was the one to speak. "We'd better go to bed, Felix. Madame Champollion sent word through Nicolas that we have to leave early tomorrow."

"Oh she did, did she!" scoffed Papa.

"Don't hold it against her, Felix. She can't help it. I think that she's sorry. She has taken quite a shine to our Nicolas. But what can she do? She's only the landlord's employee."

"Right. But let me tell you this—we don't have to leave early. We don't have to, no siree. We just have to be gone before sunset. That's what the law says, whether Madame Champollion likes it or not. We shall stay here as long as we can."

"But Felix, we have to get settled in that streetcar before dark. The days are short now; the sun sets at five o'clock. In order to get there in time we have to leave—"

"Listen!" interrupted Papa, and suddenly his voice had a joyous ring. "Listen to me carefully, Marie! Suppose we are not out of here by sundown?"



"Not out by sundown!" exclaimed Maman.

"That's it—not out by sundown. Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well!" cried Papa. "Don't you know that if we aren't out of this place before sunset the landlord can't put us out before sunrise on Tuesday. We gain a whole day and a night!"

"What do you mean, the landlord can't put us out?"

"He can't. That's the law. No eviction before sunrise or after sundown!"

Nicolas was holding his breath. He wished he could see Maman's face! What did she think of Papa's idea?

He didn't have to wait long to know. Maman said in a tired voice, "Felix, sometimes you are like a child! If it were as simple as you make out, how is it that people are ever evicted at all? Just hold on until sunset and the trick is done! Felix, dear, you act as if you didn't know that the police are there to enforce the landlord's order if need be. Suppose we try, and do not bestir ourselves tomorrow morning? You can be sure the cops will turn up."

"True," acknowledged Papa, "and yet—suppose something happens, something wholly unexpected, like—"

"Like what?" challenged Maman.

"I don't know—something that would make it impossible for us to move, something—"

"You're daydreaming, Felix. There could be no such a thing. Even if one of us were sick we would have to move, and you know it. The trouble with you is that you have too much imagination. Nicolas takes after you."

Nicolas could not help pressing his lips together so as not to smile. He was so pleased! He had imagination, as Papa did! Maman said so. Suddenly he remembered: *If only you had thought of shoveling the milk bottles into the oven.* His contentment died out. No, he didn't have imagination, like Papa. If he had had, they would not have to move tomorrow. If only he could think of something—as Papa had said—something.

"We'd better get to bed," sighed Papa.

Maman got up, saying, "Yes, I will, right away, and you can have a hot bath in the washtub. I have kept it warm on the stove. Nicolas had a bath, and I had one after he went to sleep. It's your turn now, and your last chance for a long time, probably."

Soon after, Nicolas heard the bedroom door shut. Maman had gone to bed. Then he heard water splash and, finally, run down the drain. Papa had taken his bath. Very slowly Nicolas turned around and opened

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one eye a tiny bit. He saw Papa bending over the laundry basket and shaking his head sorrowfully. "Papa!" Nicolas called in a whisper.

Papa came over. "You should be asleep," he said. But he sat at the foot of the cot, which was just what Nicolas wanted. He said, "Papa, Madame Champollion—"

"Never mind Madame Champollion, Nicolas. I know what she told you. We will leave as soon as it is convenient. Guess where we are going to live? In an old streetcar!"

Nicolas nodded gravely, not letting on that he already knew.

"You don't seem to like the idea!" exclaimed Papa. "What about playing streetcar-driver?"

Nicolas shook his head. "I like it better here."

"Who doesn't! But since we have to go, a streetcar is much better than a tent. It has a roof."

Now Papa was saying just what Maman had told him. Well, Nicolas knew the answer too. "The roof of a streetcar is not a real roof. It will be awfully cold in there."

"Already spoiled, eh!" teased Papa. "We all are. One night under a real roof and we can't rough it any more. No good for Indians!" And Papa smiled at Nicolas. Nicolas did not feel like smiling back, but he did; he



could not let Papa down. Then he tried again to tell Papa what weighed on his heart. "Papa, Madame Champollion—"

"Nicolas, Madame Champollion did the best she could. And so did you, son."

"But Papa—"

"That's enough, Nicolas. Now we have to get ready for what's ahead of us. That means Big Chief and Little Chief have to get some sleep right away." He rose, bent over, kissed Nicolas, and turned off the light.

Nicolas, disappointed, lay in bed. Not only had he wanted to tell Papa about the milk bottles, but he had also meant to talk to him about that "something" that might happen. Maybe he and Papa together could concoct a plan. But Papa had gone to bed. Now, all by himself, Nicolas would have to use the imagination Maman said he had.

He tried to remember the conversation he had just overheard. Papa had said that twenty-four hours more in this place might make all the difference. He had also said that after sunset they could not be put out. So it was plain to Nicolas that the "something" had to take place between sunrise and sunset. Maman had said that nothing could possibly happen that might prevent them from moving. But maybe he, Nicolas, could devise a plan that would work.

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Suppose the three of them broke their legs? . . . No good.

Suppose there was a flood, or a fire? . . . No good.

Suppose the old galoot dropped dead? . . . Wonderful! That would do it. Surely the eviction would be postponed for at least twenty-four hours. Nicolas felt elated. Of course it meant that Mr. Monfort had to be dead before sunrise. Maybe he was dying right now! What a comforting thought!

But after a while, the rosy outlook faded away, and Nicolas knew it to be just what it was: wishful thinking. Such convenient luck might happen in a story in a book, but not in real life. No, indeed. As the sun would rise tomorrow, so would Mr. Monfort, and neither would there be any flood or fire to come to their rescue. As to their legs, they would be in perfect shape to take the three of them to the old streetcar. It was no use waiting for something to happen. It would not. Maman was right.

And yet Nicolas could not give up. He tossed and tossed in his bed. Nothing was going to happen—nothing. . . . But what about *making* it happen? Yes, what about it? But this hopeful outlook did not last—he couldn't start a flood, or a fire, or break the legs of three people. He couldn't even kill Mr. Monfort!

No. It looked as if nothing could possibly be done. They would have to move to the old streetcar tomorrow—and all because, as Madame Champollion said, he, Nicolas, had not—

Suddenly he opened his eyes wide in the dark. He knew! At first he was not quite sure, but as he thought out the details he became more and more certain. He, himself, would be the “something.” He would be “it.” He was going to disappear—before sunrise. He would run away, and stay out all day, until sunset. Papa and Maman would look for him. That would take time. Surely they would not go away without him. But the police? Well, Papa would have to tell them that his ten-year-old son was gone and that he could not move away until he was found. It meant, of course, that the police would start looking for him. Nicolas didn’t relish the idea. But Paris was a big place, and if he kept moving all day he felt pretty confident that he wouldn’t be noticed. Then, after five o’clock, he would come back. The sun would have set and no one could put them out. Twenty-four hours would be gained, twenty-four more hours for the twins under a real roof—and maybe, by that time, a break in the weather would have come.

How simple! However, as he rehearsed the whole thing in his mind he could see two difficulties. The first one was to wake up in time, before sunrise. But then he

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remembered that Maman got up to feed the twins when it was still dark, and he usually woke up then—for a short time, anyway. The other difficulty was to get out of the apartment without attracting attention. He would have to wait until Maman had gone back to bed and to sleep. Then he would slip out. Before sunrise. Until sunset. What a good idea!

After what seemed to him a very short time he was awakened by the light that Maman had turned on to prepare the milk bottles. He lay very still. He was afraid to go back to sleep, though. He pinched himself. At last Maman turned off the light and went back to bed. He waited. Everything was very quiet. He waited some more. His heart was beating fast. For a moment he longed to give up his plan. But no. He would have to go through with it.

With the utmost care he got out of bed. He knew exactly where he had put all his clothes. He dressed quickly, except for his shoes. He kept listening. No one stirred. He put on his beret, his cape, his muffler. Holding his shoes in his hand, he paused. Now he wished Papa would open the bedroom door and make it impossible for him to go. But there was not a sound. He was alone.

Cautiously he opened the door, stepped outside and closed it. He started down the stairs. Now that he had

done it he did not want to be caught. Suppose Papa were getting up now! As he passed the door he had an idea. He opened and closed the door. That way, if Papa or Maman had heard him go they would think that he had stopped there and would be back soon. This gave him a little extra time to get away. The point was for him to be beyond reach as quickly as possible. In his stocking feet he raced downstairs, past Madame Champollion's quarters, opened and closed the front door very quietly.

Then he saw the avenue—and his blood froze.

The avenue was completely deserted. The street lamps shed a pale glow in the grayish rising winter dawn. It was bitterly cold. Far away church chimes tolled slowly—Dong-ong! Dong-ong! Dong-ong! Dong-ong! Dong-ong! Dong-ong! Six o'clock.

He stood, his back to the door, incapable of moving, fear mounting in him like a wave and choking him. He had not expected this. When he had made his plan he had thought of the avenue as he knew it in the daytime, with bustling people, shops, traffic—not this frightening, empty, half-dark, lifeless, and silent expanse, with the eerie shadows of trees whose branches extended like arms of foreboding giants.

He wanted to go back in again, to run upstairs and hide in the warm shelter of the room, with Papa, Maman, and the twins.

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The twins! He gulped, leaned against the wall, and put on his shoes. Then he pushed his beret way down, gathered his cape around him, dug his head in his muffler, took a deep breath, and started running full speed down the avenue.

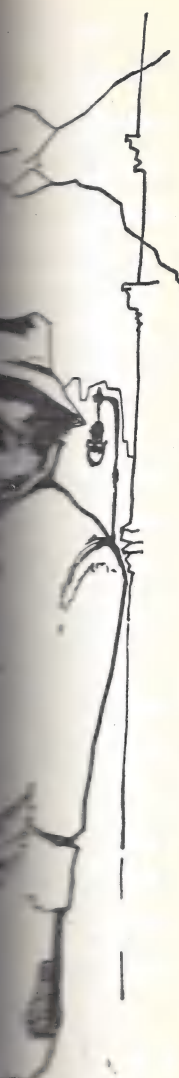






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## VII

### STRANGE FRIEND

In one breath Nicolas galloped to the end of the avenue, toward the center of the city. The clack-clack of his wooden soles in the silence gave him courage. As he turned the corner he threw a quick glance over his shoulder: no one was after him.

He stopped and looked around. He was now in a large square. He had never been there before. The previous days, when he had run errands for Maman, he had had to go along the avenue in the other direction. In the faint, cold light he saw some men coming from different avenues and hastening toward the subway entrance. Nicolas knew the subway; there was a station not far from where he had lived before, and he had ridden on the subway occasionally with Papa, going to the zoo. He walked toward the entrance. The lighted stairway

looked friendly, with the few people going down. Nicolas stopped. Where would he go? He had no money.

"Where are you going, my boy?" asked a masculine voice.

Nicolas looked up into a fatherly face with a graying mustache. He did not answer.

"You're too young to be out alone this early. Are you waiting for somebody?" insisted the man.

Nicolas tightened his lips.

"Look here," scolded the man, "I've no time to lose. I've got to go to work. Answer me!" And impatiently he reached for Nicolas's shoulder. Nicolas ducked and started running. Without looking to the right or to the left he ran and ran. Then he stopped. Then he ran again until he could run no more. Where was he? He had no idea, and he didn't care—only that he had not let himself be caught by the man. He kept walking straight ahead.

After a while he found himself in a fairly large street. It was not so dark any more; daylight had crept up. Here and there some shopkeepers were coming out onto the street and were beginning to roll up the shutters on their shops; the dairies, the bakeries, were opening their doors. Soon the street became animated. Women and children, carrying milk cans and two-foot-long loaves of bread, passed Nicolas. It made him feel very hungry.



Someone shot out of a doorway so fast that Nicolas would have been knocked down if, at the same time, two powerful hands had not steadied him while a friendly voice exclaimed, "Goodness! Excuse me, boy. I hope you weren't carrying a full milk can under your cape!"

"No, no. Thank you!" Nicolas hastened to say, looking up into the smiling face of a big policeman. The policeman went away briskly. What a close call! Better not continue walking in that street! Nicolas turned to the right.

This side street was quiet; there were only a few people here and there. Nicolas began to feel very lonely. He was not only hungry now; he was tired, and he was cold—so cold. How far was he from home? He didn't know. He only knew that he could not begin to think of going back before five o'clock. It was a long, long way off.

Dragging his feet, he came to another large square, with a huge building in the center. The building had columns at the entrance and a dome on top. It looked very grand. Nicolas thought that perhaps he could go in and sit down and warm himself up. But when he came near the entrance he saw that the building was closed. Maybe it was too early, and maybe they would not let him in all by himself, anyhow. And yet, if only he could

warm up a bit. His feet were numb, and so were his hands. He had wound his muffler right around his face, so that only his eyes emerged, and still the cold went straight through him. Exhausted, he went on slowly, brushing against the walls as if to get some protection from them. Suddenly he felt heat under his feet. He stopped and looked down. He was standing on a grating, and the heat came from there, from the subway underneath. The smell was not pleasant, but it was warm. First he stood; then he slid down, propped his back against the wall, pulled his legs up under his cape, and bent his head. It was like being in an improvised miniature tent. The heat kept coming up. Nicolas relaxed.

He did not mean to go to sleep, right there on the sidewalk, but he did. He woke up as someone was pushing him and saying gruffly, "Move over, buddy! You can't have all the heat. And, anyhow, it's *my* grate."

Nicolas opened his eyes. Seated next to him was a mountain of rags. For the moment Nicolas was so surprised that he couldn't move.

"Didn't you hear me?" repeated the voice. Then Nicolas saw a weatherbeaten, dirty face, almost completely hidden by an unkempt beard and a mop of straggling hair, emerging from under a torn felt hat. Terrified, he moved to jump to his feet, but an iron hand stopped him.

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"Not so fast, not so fast. You can move a bit, but stay right here. Don't you know that two people can warm each other nicely? My, I never felt it so cold before in my whole life!"

And the man took Nicolas by the shoulder and held him close to him. Nicolas fought wildly. "Let me go! Let me go!"

"A thousand thunders," exclaimed the man, "that's a boy's voice!" And, still holding Nicolas, he turned slowly around and looked at him. "My word, you *are* a boy! I didn't see. My eyes are getting bad." He shook his head, but didn't let go of the terrified Nicolas. "Now, my boy," he said slowly, "don't you play games with old Farivol. It's no use; I know all of them. I'll bet I can tell you what you're up to just now. You're not going to school today. You're playing hooky! Right?"

"No!" shouted Nicolas. "Let me go!"

The man held him and said, "Then you got a wallop and ran away!"

Nicolas shook his head furiously and still struggled to get free.

Abruptly the man brought his face near Nicolas's, who tried in vain to avoid the piercing gaze of his very blue eyes. "Don't get me wrong," said the man quietly. "I'm no stool pigeon, not even for a runaway boy. I'm a tramp, yes, but I'm no informer. If you don't want to,



you don't have to tell me anything. But you can believe old Farivol: what you're doing is not right. It's not right. You'd better go home, or go to school. Running away doesn't help—ever. It really doesn't. And *I* ought to know."

His voice had become sad and gentle and, as he relaxed his hold on the boy, Nicolas did not feel afraid any more. The man asked, "Have you had breakfast?" And without waiting for an answer he drew a big chunk of bread out of his torn overcoat pocket, broke off a piece, and offered it to Nicolas.

"Thank you, sir," said Nicolas, biting into the bread ravenously, though it was none too clean. They did not speak. The grating was warm, and the bread tasted good. Bundled-up people passed by without as much as a glance at them.

After a while the man said, "You won't talk to old Farivol? Well, suit yourself. But I might be able to help you. I know all the ropes. As I said before, you have no business to be a vagrant at your age. Go home, boy. Go home."

"I can't," said Nicolas in a choked voice. And before he knew it, he had told Farivol the whole story—all about the tent, the baby sister, the twins, Toto, Madame Champollion, the laundry basket, the landlord, and then

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his own plan. He ended by saying eagerly, "So you see, sir, I can't go home before five o'clock."

"Tarnation! Tarnation!" grumbled Farivol. "I see it all! I do. And it might work—it might. But the point is, how are you going to last that long, until sunset, in this big city and in such weather? You're bound to be picked up sooner or later. It wouldn't be so bad if it were after sundown, but the difficulty is how to manage until then."

Nicolas nodded, smiling—Mr. Farivol understood! Nicolas felt so much better now that he had someone to talk to about his plan.

"I tell you what!" Farivol brightened. "Stick with me. Old Farivol is going to help you, by golly! What do you say to that?"

Nicolas hesitated. Farivol was so dirty.

"Can't make up your mind yet?" retorted Farivol quickly. "You don't have to. Think it over. As far as I'm concerned, it's settled. I'd like to help a plucky youngster like you. Who knows, maybe someday you'll become famous and after you die they'll bury you under that big dome over there, the Panthéon, where they put important people. Of course I won't be there to see it. But I'd like to think that old Farivol shared his very exclusive subway grating with you. Shake, buddy!"

He put out his hand to Nicolas and with the other took off his battered hat, waved it, and announced grandly, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to shake hands with the boy who is going to fool the whole lot of them, cops included!" He replaced his hat with a flourish and giggled. Nicolas giggled too. How funny this Farivol was!

"Now, Farivol," said a voice above them, "it's eight o'clock. You can't stay here any longer. Move on, move on."

Slowly Nicolas's eyes traveled up the figure standing above him. Blue gabardine pants! His heart jumped. Before he saw the cap, he knew—a policeman. Instinctively Nicolas pressed himself against Farivol. Never mind his dirty rags. Nicolas wanted to disappear altogether. But it was too late.

"What's that boy doing here?" inquired the policeman. "Where do you live, young fellow?"

"He's a relative of mine," said Farivol quickly. "Yes, officer, a relative—from the country. He came to visit me, just for a day, officer. I met him at the station early this morning. I'll see him off tonight. Isn't he a fine boy, officer? Just the picture of my sister. The very picture!" moaned Farivol, and with that he started hugging Nicolas and kissing him on both cheeks. Nicolas found himself engulfed in smelly rags, and a coarse beard brushed

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his face. But he didn't care. Anything was better than being arrested.

"Ah, officer," Farivol went on, with tears in his voice, "see! Such affection! Just like my sister! But come on, my boy. We must not annoy this kind guardian of the peace who has to attend to his duties. Let's go."

And Farivol got up. So did Nicolas.

The policeman shook his head. "That boy, he doesn't look like any nephew of yours. Your sister must be a better character than you!"

"How right you are, officer, how right! My sister, she's an angel—an angel!"

"Mark my words," called the policeman as Farivol moved away, holding Nicolas by the hand, "I don't want to see you loitering around here again today, or I'll arrest you—and the boy too!"

Farivol raised his hat. "Check!" he called. "And many thanks, officer."

They went down Soufflot Street. "What did I tell you?" Farivol chuckled. "I know the ropes. You've just got to figure out how to handle those fellows, that's all."

After what had just happened Nicolas knew for sure that he wanted to stay with Farivol. Also, as they went along, the city seemed to be getting bigger and bigger, and Nicolas was happier and happier not to be entirely on his own.

They passed a large garden. "That's the Luxemburg Garden," said Farivol. "It's a fine place to rest when the weather is good."

"Do they have animals?" inquired Nicolas, thinking of the zoo.

"No. But in summer they have a Punch and Judy show; and small donkeys to ride; and a merry-go-round. All that in the open, under the trees. Summer! My, I wish tomorrow was summer! My boy, I'm getting old for this sort of life. Old, old."

Down the Boulevard St. Michel they went, hand in hand. On the sidewalks hundreds of students of all nationalities and races hurried, on their way to the Sorbonne, and boys of Nicolas's age hastened to school. At the intersection with the Boulevard St. Germain there stood a traffic policeman. Nicolas tried to hide behind Farivol. He was afraid that the policeman might know just by looking at him that he was not going to school today. He was relieved when they proceeded toward the river.

A large street clock said "8:20." Eight-twenty! thought Nicolas. Papa and Maman are looking for me all over. Perhaps Mr. Monfort is there too, and Papa is telling him that he cannot move until he has found me. Good, good! If only five o'clock were not so far away!

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Nicolas kept his eyes on the clock as he walked past, but the hands hardly seemed to move at all.

They came to the river. Puffing, Farivol leaned against the embankment, repeating, "I can't take it any more. It's too darned cold, that's what it is."

Nicolas shivered too as he looked at the Seine carrying large slabs of ice—just as Madame Champollion had said. Many people, stopping to view the unusual sight, shook their heads mournfully.





"Yes, yes," muttered Farivol, "pretty bad for poor people. My boy, as I always say—" He turned toward Nicolas, brought his face near him, and exclaimed, "But you're all blue! Come on, we must keep moving!"

Along the quais they plodded. On their left emerged Notre-Dame cathedral.

"Notre-Dame!" said Farivol hopefully, stopping to consider, then resuming his walk. "No, it wouldn't do. It's not heated very much. And it's damp. Ah, if it were the United States! My boy, have you heard about churches in the United States?"

But there was no answer from Nicolas. He was too cold. Farivol jerked him by the hand roughly and shouted, "Listen! In America, churches are so warm that you can't keep your coat on! Can you believe it?"

Nicolas made a great effort to speak and asked, "Then, in America, poor people can go and stay in those churches and be comfortable?"

"Right! Right!" cried Farivol, as if this were a big discovery. "Right! Only they don't."

"Why don't they?" asked Nicolas, his teeth chattering.

"They don't, because there aren't any!" said Farivol triumphantly. "Nobody is poor in America!"

"Nobody!" Nicolas gasped.

"Nobody," said Farivol conclusively. "That's what

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I've been told." He threw an anxious look at Nicolas's face. "Don't you know that song? Let me see. How does it go?" He hummed softly:

Once upon a time, Lady Bread-and-Butter  
Lived in a fresh butter palace . . .

"I know! I know!" cried Nicolas eagerly, and he began to sing.

*"Il était un' dame Tartine  
Dans un palais de beurre frais.  
La muraille était de farine,  
Le parquet était de croquet,  
La chambre à coucher,  
De crème et de lait,  
Le lit de biscuits,  
Les rideaux d'anis."*

Once upon a time Lady Bread-and-Butter  
Lived in a fresh butter palace.  
The walls were of flour,  
The floor of crackers,  
The bedroom  
Was all cream and milk,  
The bed of cookies,  
With curtains of anise.

Farivol beat time with his hand, and Nicolas skipped as he sang.

"That's it, that's it!" approved Farivol with a sweeping gesture. "Ah, those old French folk songs! . . . Now, do you see what I mean? Lady Bread-and-Butter, that's the United States!"

"Oh," cried Nicolas enthusiastically, "I would like to go there, with Papa, Maman, and the twins!" He added quickly, "And with you too, Mr. Farivol."

"Thanks," said Farivol. "Only it's very difficult."

"Money?" inquired Nicolas knowingly.

"Not only that, not only that. You've got to show a white paw."

"Like in 'The Billy Goat and the Three Goat Kin'?" asked Nicolas.

"Right."

Nicolas looked with distress at his own dirty hand. He hurried to hide it again under his cape. It certainly would not do for America. He said, "Mr. Farivol, later, when I am grown up, my hands will be clean all the time, and then I can go to America, and I'll invite you."

"Well, I declare! That's mighty nice of you! Mighty nice! The drawback is about my own hands. I can't call them clean."

Nicolas had not thought of that. He wanted to say something that would make Mr. Farivol feel better, but he couldn't find one single word.

Suddenly Mr. Farivol slapped him hard on the back.

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"I know! You'll invite me to the United States, and I'm going to invite you someplace right now. What about a nice hot drink? I know of a small place around here. What about something to warm us up, right straight through, eh?"

Nicolas tried to speak, but his lips were nearly frozen and he felt so tired and so cold that he could hardly drag himself along.

"Sure, sure," chanted Farivol, "that's what we're going to do. Come on. Stamp your feet hard. We're getting there."



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## VIII

### LOST

At last they turned into Galande Street. Farivol opened the door of a small café and they walked in. All at once the warmth of the place penetrated Nicolas through and through. How wonderful!

"Well, well, well, if it isn't old Farivol!" exclaimed the man behind the counter. "How are you? And where did you pick up this clean, nice-looking youngster?"

"My nephew," said Farivol curtly, at the same time stepping on Nicolas's toes to warn him.

"Your neph—"

"I've just told you, boss," remarked Farivol in a touchy tone. "My nephew—on a visit from the country. I've got to treat him right. What about something to warm him up? Something—maybe a cup of coffee? No, that won't do. I know, what about a nice cup of



chocolate? That's it. Give him a large, hot cup of chocolate."

The man at the counter shook his head. "No, Farivol. No more credit."

"Who's speaking of credit!" roared Farivol. "Boss, you're insulting me, right in front of—of—my own nephew! I'll show you!"

He dug feverishly in one pocket after the other. Nicolas held his breath. A cup of hot chocolate! Would Farivol have enough money? He put down on the counter one piece of change after another, until the man said, "That's enough." Farivol looked at what was left in his hand and mumbled to himself, "That will just get him back home on the subway, at five o'clock."

Already, after having dipped the cup in hot water, the man was pouring the steaming and foaming chocolate. "There, boy!" he said. But Nicolas was too small to reach the counter.

"Go and sit down," said Farivol, taking the cup and carrying it to the table. "Drink, my boy," he urged, "drink!" Then he went back to the counter.

Nicolas put his two hands around the cup. How deliciously warm it was! Then he took the spoon and began to drink small mouthfuls of the hot liquid. After a while he raised his head and looked toward the counter. A conversation in whispers was going on between Farivol

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and the boss, and only pieces of it reached Nicolas: "a cup of coffee . . . I can't . . . hot water . . . dash of coffee . . . too many people like you . . ."

Then Farivol wheeled away from the counter. He came and sat across from Nicolas, saying very loudly, "I don't feel like having anything this morning. But go ahead, my boy, and take your time."

Nicolas finished his chocolate, and still Farivol didn't move. Nicolas was pleased. It was warm and comfortable in the café. At that hour there was no one else there, and the little street was quiet too, with just a faint hum of traffic in the distance. Nicolas didn't notice that Farivol had closed his eyes. But all of a sudden his head dropped, once, twice, and the third time, it hit the table and stayed there. Farivol began to snore. Then the boss shrugged his shoulders, went around his counter, and came over to where they were sitting.

He slapped Farivol's arm. "Eh, Farivol, this is no dormitory. Better fade away."

"Fade away!" shouted Farivol, wide awake at once. "Fade away! Didn't I pay? Didn't I pay for the boy's chocolate? Didn't I?"

"Sure. But that doesn't give you any right to sleep on the table. You've been here over an hour, and the workmen will be coming in any minute now for a mid-morning snack, and—"



"And my looks aren't good enough. You're ashamed of me in your place. But you're not ashamed to take my money, oh no! Listen—it's freezing, freezing outside, and this boy—"

"Better get out," cut in the boss sharply. "Better get out, Farivol, I tell you. That nephew of yours—there's something phony about it—"

"Mind your own business, boss!" snapped Farivol defiantly as he rose with dignity and motioned to Nicolas. "Come on, my boy. Say thank you to this good gentleman who was kind enough to sell us a cup of chocolate."

"Farivol," protested the man in a hurt tone, "you're unfair. I do my best. After all, I'm in business. This is no charitable inst—"

"Business! No dormitory! No charitable institution!" roared Farivol, opening the door. He swung around and yelled, "And in case you don't know it, boss—no justice either!" And he slammed the door.

Outside, the cold hit Nicolas, but he felt much better after the good drink and the long rest in the warm café. He started to walk faster.

"Not so quickly, not so quickly, my boy," said Farivol. "I'm not feeling too well this morning. My, it's cold! We can't stay out long. Where shall we go? . . . I'll tell you! We'll go down in the subway. It's warm